



Phallic Nightmares

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ambivalence of male hunting rituals, he could have followed William Faulkner's Ike McCaslin for a conservative, Southern version of the genre, or Norman Mailer's D.J. for a more radical, technologically sophisticated one. Faulkner's "The Bear" and Mailer's *Why Are We In Vietnam?* have more complex structures and purposes; without any sacrifice of epic power or any shrinking from consequences, their heroes are placed against a background of the social and economic forces which are their undoing. When Ike and D.J. perform their acts of renunciation and refuse to shoot their bears, the moral significance of their forbearance is as complicated as the forests in which they hunt. When Cimino sends his Pennsylvania steelworker out to hunt, he transports him to sublime mountain peaks which are emphatically not in Pennsylvania, and accompanies the action with an embarrassingly lush and obvious score. When Mike pulls his shot at the conclusion of *The Deer Hunter*, the effect is as maudlin and pretentious as the contrived enchantment of the setting. It is reminiscent of Natty Bumppo, pausing in the sanctified calm of nature to regret that he had succumbed to the temptation of sport and shot an eagle.

Given Cimino's preference for this simple, individualistic Western, it is logical that he would view modern war as a game of Russian roulette. This metaphor states an important truth. Since war has been industrialized, it has ceased to be a test of individual strength and character. Heroism has become a matter of survival against mathematical odds, the "kill-ratios" calculated by bureaucratic macho in air-conditioned, fallout-proof war game rooms. But the metaphor is still a very limiting one, and particularly since Cimino seems satisfied to linger with its absurdity, that one chamber in six with live ammunition, that ironic mockery of the chivalric field of honor, where victory is just survival and, except for the charmed Mike, survival is mere chance.

It isn't just *Rough Riders* and *Deadeye Dicks* who find this horrifying, but it is still true that wars today are much more than matters of individual heroism or suffering. To win a modern war is to be able to mobilize an entire population for anonymous sacrifices, and sacrifices which will fall most heavily on powerless conscripts and civilians. The point is that the Viet-

namese won their war. Even Henry Kissinger finally had to admit that our clients in the South failed because they could not mobilize local support. The conservatives who finally extricated us from Vietnam and ended the draft were beginning to fear their own local population and its resistance to mobilization. Cimino's film frightens some liberals and heartens some conservatives because it suggests resources of patriotism out there which survived Vietnam.

Cimino may not have intended that, any more than he intended to echo General Curtis LeMay's dismissal of the Asian regard for human life. But his naive choice of Cooper over Faulkner or Mailer leaves him open to such charges. Cimino's film is racist, but it is racist in the thoughtless sense the mass consumption Western always was. It is also at least as touching, as infuriating, and as important for national self-knowledge as Cooper's innocent American saga was.

—DAVID AXEEN

PHALLIC NIGHTMARES

The Deer Hunter is, for most viewers, a powerful experience, and I take it that one task of criticism is to explain a film's strength, even in cases when (as here) the film in question is in many ways confused, politically mindless, or worse. A racist or reactionary film may be redeemed from the trashbins of film history if it has enough artistic force and enough human significance in other areas than the political. Will this conceivably be the case with Cimino's film, as it was, for example, with Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*?

It is not altogether outrageous to mention Cimino alongside Griffith; they share an artificial folk sentimentality and an unabashed resort to melodrama, not to mention an unquestioning ethnocentricity, which appeal to large audiences, and they both have great graphic flair. But we cannot really go terribly far with this comparison.

Moreover, *The Deer Hunter* seems so haphazardly thrown together from a plot standpoint that we might well credit the stories that it contains elements from several other intended projects, not too well patched together. Yet this is too easy an out. It is true that ordinary dramatic probability is given short shrift in the film. Wild

coincidence is relied on to get the three buddies together in Vietnam, and to bring Michael and Nick at the same moment into the same Saigon gambling den. The buddies appear about ten years too old to get into Airborne; to judge by Angela's child, they must have spent about three years in Vietnam. The realities of Vietnamese society and the political side of the war are simply "disappeared." But, perhaps to compensate, a majestic Orthodox cathedral is magically transported to a tiny Pennsylvania steel town, and Alpine peaks sprout among the peaceful, rounded Alleghenies.

Nonetheless, the thing *does* hold together; audiences sit through it. We must attempt to understand why.

One necessary step is to note that the scenes of refugees and evacuation are powerful and affecting, but are very peripheral to the dramatic structure of the film. The only scene in which Cimino deals with an actual act of war is the flame-thrower episode, and this functions mainly to solidify his point about the Vietnamese being bestial brutes. The war itself does not really interest Cimino, probably because it is a phenomenon of *organized*, not personal, violence. What interests Cimino is men and guns. The war is window-dressing; and indeed it could (and *should*) have been some other war. For the real project of the film is to examine male friendship under pressure.

The pressure comes from two directions. One, the fact that both Mike and Nick love the same woman, Linda, would in the forties or fifties have usually been handled in a comic mode; here, it becomes paralyzing and ultimately even gruesome. The second pressure, the war, is transmuted into the very peculiar metaphor of Russian roulette. It is hard to explain why *Deer Hunter* steers so clear of combat; the unpredictable bloody violence endemic to guerrilla war might seem ideal as a heroic test for Cimino's characters. Why did he not use it? My hunch is that he feared the intrusion of the realities of combat into the film would have jeopardized the emotional "purity" of his theme—just as showing the realities of Michael stalking, killing, and dressing a deer would have undermined his high-flown imagery. To show fighting might have reminded viewers that this was a war that turned men

against officers, Vietnamese against each other, and Americans against the Vietnamese they were supposedly saving—in a word, it might have recalled the fact that Vietnam was on every level an intensely political war.

Cimino could not afford this, because he was making a film about men's friendships. This is a worthy and important project, in principle.* Deep friendships among men are rare, and are probably diminishing further in our alienated and competitive society, despite some "men's groups" and other conscious efforts to promote them. Cimino had a sound, if evasive, instinct in situating his tale of male camaraderie in the "exotic" setting of the working class, and in a non-metropolitan, "backward" (and highly mythical) part of the country; for middle-class urban life seems destructive to committed friendships of all kinds, but perhaps particularly to those among men—which are more vulnerable than those of women to the effects of economic and sexual competition and to the fear of homosexuality. Our natural need for friendship is desperately thwarted today, and this, I think, accounts for much of the "nostalgic" appeal of *The Deer Hunter*.

But the film, like its characters, carries inarticulacy to the point of mystification; it's on the level of Michael's "This is *this*!" about the bullet, or his "Okay" to the second deer. The feelings involved in the friendships that are under pressure *have* to remain ineffable, because if they were made explicit modern urban audiences would not be able to take them seriously. There *is*, on the one hand, a conflict between friendship and romantic love: if either Nick or Mike allowed themselves a truly serious attachment to Linda, it *would* endanger their friendship. Nick perhaps senses this when he pushes her off onto Mike at the reception; it may also underlie his mysterious decision not to phone her or return. And Mike, who has promised not to leave Nick behind, cannot really accept Linda's invitation to sleep together until he has made the utmost attempt to salvage the friendship bond

*I have spent much of my spare time this past year in writing, with Christine Leefeldt, an interview-based book called *The Art of Friendship*, to be published by Pantheon in October, in which a special chapter is devoted to the potentialities and problems of men's friendships.

by returning to Saigon and trying to bring Nick back.

And on the other hand there are psychic perils within the friendship itself. To get at how these function symbolically in the film, we must recall the utter improbability of the Russian roulette scenes, and attempt to explain how they got into the film.

The basic emotional logic of the plot requires the testing of the men's friendship through various perils. Sexual love for a woman is, as we have seen, treated as a real but relatively minor peril in itself. The major test of the men's devotion is supposed to be the war. Of course threats to the men's friendship could have arisen from a vast number of sources, ranging from natural or man-made disasters (forest fires, earthquakes, nuclear melt-downs) to people-connected ones (bloody strikes in the steel mills). Cimino probably felt that a war was conveniently simple and dramatic, and filming it would require no complex or subtle dealing with social processes—not Cimino's strong suit, to say the least. What was crucial structurally was to find stresses that act differentially upon the three men, a dramatic mechanism that could connect the war, felt as the contamination of a pure America by filthy Asians, to the three buddies. Russian roulette, though as far as I can determine it is utterly unknown in Asia, provided this factitious connection.

We might briefly consider the implications of this plot device on the level of cultural stereotype. Asians, like practically every other people, include individuals who like to gamble (in peaceful Bali, cockfighting is a major institution); but in analyzing a script we must talk in terms of dramatic structure, not ethnography or sociology. Why then does the Russian roulette "fit," as audiences evidently feel it does, with the kind of portrayal of friendship that *Deer Hunter* is engaged in?

Here we begin to skate on rather thin Freudian ice. But, emboldened by the fact that the old Viennese master has recently been rehabilitated so enthusiastically in Paris, I shall slip around on it a bit. To begin with, we must take at least somewhat seriously the traditional notion that the gun is a phallic symbol, a particularly male instrument of power and threat and domination.

All the critical dramatic scenes in *Deer Hunter* (including the flame-thrower scene) turn on the employment of a gun, either against others—including the difficult friend Stan, and the deer—or oneself. Events of other kinds—the wedding, the party, Michael's visit to Steve in the hospital, Nick's departure from the Saigon hospital—by contrast have a sort of second-class status in the film. They may be ornate photographically, but tend to be inert dramatically, are shot and edited rather lazily, and don't make much sense. The sole exception is the first bar scene, which is choreographed, shot and edited with a languorous beauty, and cut to an affecting song.* In this and other scenes between Michael and Nick, Cimino and his actors manage a kind of intimacy between men which is rarely seen on film. It is not exactly the old Howard Hawks, Boy Scout, sexually pubescent friendship; the Nick character, at least, seems too emotionally sophisticated for that, and there is the insoluble problem of Linda. Nor is it a self-conscious, urban, "relationship-oriented" friendship. It is, in its best moments, at least a passable rendition of an old, established friendship between two men who have deep love and respect for each other.

But there is, of course, a rub. Just as it has been problematic in American films for several years to portray a good relationship between a man and a woman—which has helped to lead, no doubt, to the recent spate of buddy films—so it has become problematic now to portray a good friendship between men. The old Hawksian formula of nonverbalized loyalty, duty, team solidarity seems too simple-minded to use any more. With our greater sophistication about psychology—a legacy in part, ironically, of the great wave of popularized Freudianism that swept America in the forties and fifties—such innocent fantasies have become impossible. And this allows critics to write of *Deer Hunter* as an expression of "homosexual panic."

But the situation is more complicated than that. It is a truism that American men are almost uniformly deeply fearful that affection for another man might have sexual components, and that expressing it might lead to overt sexual contact

*As David Schickele has pointed out to me, however, men in real working-class bars do not spray beer recklessly on expensive pool tables!

and ensuing ill-defined horrors. This powerful phobia is both saddening (because such fear is a damaging impediment to full expression of feelings in male friendships) and exaggerated (all friendships have conscious or unconscious erotic components, no matter what the genders or sexual preferences of the persons involved).

It is at least theoretically reasonable that Russian roulette is the symbolic (and Cimino is nothing if not a symbolic director) equivalent of these fears. *Deer Hunter* is certainly not merely a subliminally erotic buddy picture; it is, instead, more like a violent meditation upon the "possibility" of such a drama; its violence, from a Freudian viewpoint, would represent a *repression* of that possibility, and by the "phallic" gun, directed upon the self but controlled by "chance."* As John Simon has astutely noted (*National Review*, 16 Feb. 1979), Nick chooses to pull the trigger (and blows his brains out) just after Michael, who has come to rescue him, finally says, "I love you."

Such, in Cimino's vision, are the perils of *amicitia*, once the most honored of relationships among men. It is also worth noticing that Michael, in order to teach Stan a lesson about fooling around with guns, presses a revolver to *his* head and takes a one-in-six chance of blowing *his* brains out. (Stan functions in the plot as a grossly sexually oriented foil to the other three men's chaste devotion; John, the bar owner, functions as a sort of father figure; Axel functions as the clown.)

And what of the hunting of the deer? It is hard for me to take these sequences seriously, and not only because of the heavenly choirs with which Cimino accompanies the action. I happen to come from Pennsylvania, and still love its soft, rounded, tree-covered eastern mountains. To have DeNiro and friends drive a little while and find themselves in craggy Alpine terrain near treeline—territory that can't be found within 2,000 miles of Pennsylvania—is too much even

for me. Especially when DeNiro, after leaping agilely over a few rocks, brings down his mighty stag within about a hundred yards of a nifty studio-built hunting shack. (If deer hunting was that easy, we wouldn't have to worry about the rising price of meat.) The sequences are doubtless intended to establish the dignity of the hunter, and his pride in the exercise of his predatory skills. At the risk of offending my vegetarian friends, I don't find this a dismal objective, but the point is bungled through grandiosity and vagueness. Instead of a symbolic shared celebration of phallic power, Michael does the hunting while Nick tags along and "looks at the trees." Nonetheless, if the deer hunt is the power dream, the Russian roulette is its nightmare counterpart, the phallus turned against itself. Fascination with and fear of the phallus is a persistent theme of Western culture; but we must leave that to students of broad psychocultural phenomena, and content ourselves here with noting the relegation of women, in the world of the phallic nightmare, to secondary status. Women may be some slight palliative, but they are not a significant force. It is men who must cope with the beauty and horror of the gun, and men who compel other men to face its lethal danger. After finally passing his last test, Michael returns home to Linda, in an America symbolically damaged beyond recovery or recompense. One of the friends is dead, one is maimed, and one remains alive to grieve. These men had done "what a man's gotta do." But the blame falls comfortably elsewhere.

Cimino's jingoist attitude toward the Vietnamese is morally and politically reprehensible. But we must remember how close it is to a large segment of American opinion, even anti-Vietnam War opinion. Much opposition to the war was not noble and principled, but merely a feeling either that the war couldn't be won, and ought therefore to be stopped, or that it was a mistake to waste so much blood and treasure on behalf of "those people." *Deer Hunter* mobilizes this quasi-racist feeling very neatly. Moreover, to judge from conversations with Vietnam veterans, I gather that the film catches accurately a prevalent soldier's view of the war: a grudging respect for the Vietcong and NVA, coupled with revulsion for the corrupt, self-serving South Vietnamese. This

*Again to indulge in a Freudian reading, we may remember that fantasies of rape—no matter the sexual-preference or gender situation involved—commonly function to "allow" sexual pleasure since it is not the victim's "responsibility." But it is not only pleasure which can be thus freed of usual emotional restraints—so can aggression; and, at least symbolically, even against the self.

attitude, of course, is precisely the opposite of the "bringing the war home" attempted by *Coming Home* or *Who'll Stop the Rain*; but, like them, *Deer Hunter* obfuscates and mystifies the systematic causes of the war, which lay in American policies. But then, considering how obscure virtually everything is in this puzzling film, that should be no surprise.

—ERNEST CALLENBACH

Reviews

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

Director: Peter Weir. Script by Cliff Green, based on the novel by Joan Lindsay. Photography: Russell Boyd. Atlantic Releasing Corp.

The Hanging Rock in the title of this powerfully unnerving film by Australian director Peter Weir is a centuries-old volcanic eruption forty miles from Melbourne. It is the monolith that dominates all other images on the screen in precisely the same way it looms above objects in its surrounding countryside—it is the focal point for the world around it, the measure for everyone and everything in view.

In the film the Rock is also the site of a St. Valentine's Day outing, planned for the students of Appleyard College, a Victorian "finishing school" for young ladies. The year is 1900. Though the film opens on this factual note, there is from the outset a sense that human reality is both relative and illusory, an impression conveyed on several different levels. Anne Lambert, in the central role of Miranda, informs us by means of a voice-over that "What we see and what we seem are but a dream; a dream within a dream"; the Shakespearean echo is almost superfluous, however, as Russell Boyd's cinematography unfolds in a series of images so lush and chimerical that they seem less the product of his camera than the result of brush-strokes by the elder Renoir.

On screen, Miranda wakes to the dream-life of Appleyard—one which is familiar to us all in its apparent order, security and control. Its artificiality and repressiveness are also uncom-

fortably recognizable. The opening sequence of St. Valentine's morning is characterized by the excitement of the girls' exchange of greetings among themselves and their teachers. It closes, however, with the haunting image of one of the girls imprisoning a rose in a flower-press. What had been a delicate, vital blossom becomes a beautiful, dead icon.

The pressing of the rose emblematically depicts the emotional ambience of the school. The symbol of eternal love is closed in the airless device just as the affection between Miranda and Sara (Margaret Nelson), an orphan and the school's youngest boarder, is enclosed in a social context which makes it inverted and incapable of further growth. While Miranda ambivalently warns Sara that she must learn to love others, she simultaneously extends the hope that Sara will one day visit Miranda's family. The ambiguity of the girls' relationship is a touchstone for the emotional bonding of the inhabitants of Appleyard.

Appleyard is a hot-house Eden. Its blossoms would not survive in natural settings, and Miranda at least seems hesitantly aware of their fragility. The film is threaded with various kinds of incipiently lesbian relationships. An exchange of Valentines among the schoolgirls is seen as a natural outgrowth of the intensity of friendships established in the confines of a girls' boarding school. The Valentines sent to their teachers, when not small jokes, are evidence of heroine-worship. The affection of Mlle. de Poitiers (Helen Morse) for her charges seems based mainly on aesthetic grounds—it is she who articulates the resemblance of Miranda to a Botticelli angel. But there is a darker underside to the emotional life of Appleyard, and it is hinted at in Sara's morbid preoccupation with Miranda, alive or dead. An even darker shading is apparent in the twisted, quasi-sadistic responses of some of the adult teachers to their students, especially in the character of Mrs. Appleyard (Rachel Roberts). What is of importance in the film is not the nature of the sexual passion, but the ways in which it is either expressed or repressed.

Much of the film rests on a polarity between the conscious and the unconscious; light and dark, exposed and hidden. The very mode of celebrating Valentine's Day is significant. The